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THE FOOL AND DEATH

by

Manuel Komroff

SIMON was a fool. He was born a fool and he lived like a fool. But one day as he was gathering branches in the woods he came upon a skeleton.

"That's a strange thing," he said to himself. "Strange — very strange. It was not here yesterday."

The bones were white as chalk against the dark ground. They seemed to stir. The fingers trembled in the breeze and the skull every now and again moved restlessly.

The fool stood amazed and bewildered. He rubbed his eyes and looked again. The thin, symmetrically arched ribs, flat and white, moved slowly up and down with each breath of the skeleton.

Slowly and cautiously he approached the sleeping figure and when he stood quite near he hurled his huge bundle of branches upon the bones and, throwing his weight upon it all, pinned them down. The white bones shook and struggled among the black faggots, some branches snapped but the skeleton could not break itself free.

"Let me go! Let me go!" came the voice from the skull.

But Simon held him down.

"Let me go!"

"What are you doing in my woods?"

"Let me go, you fool."

"But the woods are mine. You have no right here."

"I have rights anywhere — anywhere. Let me go!"

"You ugly thing — why? Why should I let you go? What right have you in my woods?"

"Death!" cried the skeleton. "Death! My touch is stronger than anything in the world."

"So strong?"

"Yes. Let me go!"

"So strong, and you cannot even free yourself, you ghastly thing?"

"Away from me. Away, you fool. Stand off and let me go at once. Only a fool would have dared trifle with me. Let me go at once or I will wrap my hard cold fingers around your heart. Fool! You do not know what you are doing."

"You are only trying to frighten me. You bony monkey. You have no right to come into my woods and I am thinking now how you could be of some use to me. You see, if I nailed you up in the rafters of my barn — what an ugly thing you are — the sight of you might frighten away the corn thieves. Or if . . ."

"Enough! Now let me go, you fool. I will never come here again. Never. I promise. Let me go and I will perhaps do something for you. Stand off, you detain me and I am late. My work is important. Stand back!"

"Skip!" cried the fool. He moved the bundle of faggots to one side. "And do not carry off any of my branches. These are my woods. And you must not sleep here either. This is no place to sleep. Go home. Out with you. Quick!"

With a rattling sound the skeleton jumped to his feet. "What a fool. What a fool! One touch from me and you would

sleep forever. Fool!" His angry words came from the dark hollow holes in his skull.

"One slap from me and I could splinter you to bits, you horrid thing. You can't threaten me, you bag of bones! Away and out of my sight before I . . . Get out of my woods!" Simon picked up a heavy club and shook it at him.

The skeleton ran. "Fool," he cried. And as he ran his long arms swung from his sides and his loose bony hands slapped the trunks of the trees in his path. "Fool!" echoed through the woods.

"Now that's a funny fellow," said Simon to himself as he bound together his faggots. "He looks horrid and strange and he pretends to be serious. But he had better keep away from me. And he better keep out of my woods for I have no patience with that kind of fellow. I don't like all his loud shouting. And I don't like the sight of him. He had better stay away."

When Simon came home he told his neighbors about the skeleton. He related how he discovered the white bones asleep in the woods and he told in detail what the skeleton said and how he replied. He was truthful: he was a fool. And nobody believed him.

And the next day and the day after when they saw Simon they smiled. They smiled to each other and they smiled to him.

But soon they grew bolder. "Hello, Simon," someone would call. "Hello, there. How about your friend? The skeleton friend . . . you held him down, didn't you? And his bones moved and broke some of the branches. Ha ha! And you heard them rattle, didn't you? It's a good one all right. Ha ha! And in the end you took a club to him. Ha ha! How big was the club? About so big? Show us the club, Simon? That should prove it. Ha ha! You certainly have a good time in this world, don't you? Ha ha!"

The little fat tailor, who wore an old red vest, said it was all imagination — "Just plain imagination." And Simon's rich sister said that almost anything could happen in those woods, they were damp and wet and the land was not worth a penny. And the mayor of the town, who was also head of the bank, remarked that if Simon would spend his time at work instead of inventing stories about skeletons he would improve his condition and: "The sound of coins in an empty pocket is better than words in an empty head."

But the trees in the woods that were brushed by the bones of the skeleton, died. Their leaves turned brown and crumbled away and the branches lost their bark and broke in the wind.

A long black track of dead trees marked the path of the skeleton.

II

About a week later Simon went to the woods to cut some poles. There by a rocky ledge near a little cave he again came upon the sleeping skeleton.

He approached cautiously and when he was near enough he thrust one of his poles through the white ribs. He hurled it with such force that the pole quivered as it sank into the moist ground. Quickly he hurled a second and a third and pinned the skeleton to the ground.

"I have you this time. Now I have you." He wiped his brow.

"You fool! You fool!" cried the struggling skeleton.

"Yes, sure enough, I am a fool. A happy fool. But you are certainly not a wise man, otherwise you would never have come here."

Simon sat down on a stone beside the skeleton and making himself comfortable filled his pipe with tobacco and lighting it,

blew clouds of smoke before him. "There you are and here I am. That's how wise you are. I told you not to come here."

"I go where it pleases me."

"And I have you now where it pleases me."

"Let me go, I am death! I am death himself."

"I heard that story before. And I warned you. I told you to keep out of these woods. You can't say I didn't warn you."

"Only a fool would dare come so close to me. It's enough now. Let me go. I am he whom all fear; I am death — death himself."

"Sure enough, I know who you are. You told me all this before. But now I have you where you belong and there you will remain. Why should I let you go?"

"You should release me at once because, — because no man has ever dared hold me back. No living creature ever dared. I do not harm you. Why do you hold me? Why must you detain me?"

"Because you are an ugly thing. You are truly very ugly. If you could only see yourself . . . And I told you before to keep out of these woods. Yes, and when I told you this you ran off and brushed your nasty fingers across the bark of a long line of trees. And now they are all dead. Now that was not a very nice thing to do, was it? So I think you are safer spiked to the ground. That should keep you from jumping around too much and cracking your fingers against the trees. I don't care how great a man you are, that is nothing to me. All I know for certainty is that you killed my trees and you had no business to come here in the first place."

"That's all right, fool. I will fix it up with you."

"How can you fix it?"

"I will pay you for the loss."

"With what will you pay me?"

"Money, of course."

"I had money of my own once but they took it away from me. My sister and the Mayor, they have it all now. But I get along without it quite nicely."

"I will give you lots of money for the trees — much more than they are worth. Only let me go!"

"What good would the money do the trees?"

"What a fool you are!"

"And if you were a wise man you would keep your money. I don't want it."

"Then I will give you jewels. Listen, Simon, I will give you the finest jewels that you ever saw — jewels with dazzling sparkle. Real emeralds, rubies and brilliant diamonds. And pearls, too, if you like and sapphires — anything you like. Just name the gems you love and the best — anything, only you must let me go."

"My sister has a great many jewels and all sorts of sparkling things, but the branches of the dead trees are black and the leaves are gone. What good will the jewels do? Can we hang them on the dead limbs?"

"What a fool! What then do you want? Tell me, Simon, what do you most want?"

"I want you to give the trees back their twenty-five years of life. That's what I want. Give them back only what you have taken from them."

"I can't do that. You are too simple. And they are too long dead — too long. If it were only a moment ago, or even an hour or so I could perhaps . . . But it's too long, too long. Who ever heard of such a thing? No wonder you are a fool."

"Well that is what I would like. You asked me yourself what I would like. But you need not worry about it. It's quite

all right. I will just keep on smoking my pipe and you can remain just where you are and watch me."

"Be a reasonable man. What good can I do lying here?"

"No good. But anyway you would not be jumping around carelessly. You are not to be trusted."

"But, man, I have important work to be done and you are only holding it up. I can't lie here and watch you smoke. Let me go."

"Well, I must think it over. You see it is not so easy as you imagine. The last time I found you in these woods I told some people about our meeting and now the whole town is laughing. They are laughing at me because they do not believe it. That is why I must think it all over very carefully, because if I could take you home and show them just how you looked . . ."

"And what would you do with me?"

"I would nail you to the barn door so they could come and see your nasty face. Then they would believe me."

"Ha ha! You fool! If you touch me you die!"

"Yes. I thought it all out. I did not think of touching you. The way I would do it would be to throw a sack over you, a good big one, and tie it up hard and attach a long rope. There you would be at one end, and I at the other end would drag you through the woods and up the main street and over the fields to my barn. And then I could call the neighbors and we could string you up somehow or other. Don't you worry, it would work out pretty well. Nobody wants to touch you. And then when I had you safe and sound they would not laugh at me, would they?"

"Listen, Simon. You must be reasonable. I will do something for you. I will get back all the land that your sister and the Mayor took from you."

"Let them keep it. What good is land?"

"I will give you gold and you will be richer than the richest man in town."

"Richer than the Mayor who owns the bank?"

"Yes. Even richer than he. Twice as rich if you like, but you must let me go at once."

"And what will I do with the money?"

"You are simple. If you were richer than your sister and richer than the Mayor why then you could get their land and cattle and everything and all their buildings, too. And you could walk around your possessions and look at them, for if you owned them they would belong to you, and not to others."

"Oh, that's nothing. I can do all that now and they do not belong to me. Anyone that so wishes may walk about and look . . . Provided they don't kill the cattle or even trees. You heard what I said; — even trees."

"You are just an animal. You have no finer senses. Do you not desire to own the things about you? Have you no feeling for possession?"

"No. There they stand, what difference is it who owns them?"

"When something is yours then it belongs to you until you die. You can sell it or give it away but nobody can take it away from you. Nobody."

"Yes. I believed that once. But my sister took the farm away from me."

"Didn't she pay you for it?"

"Yes, she said she did, but I did not remember it. And when I asked her about it she laughed in my face and said I was a fool because she did not pay me with money but with certain papers that were as good as money. These she gave to the bank; but when I went to the bank they told me that

the papers suddenly lost their value and were now worthless. They also laughed. They laugh in my face. Even the children laugh when they see me. Tell me, what have I done that all must laugh?"

"They laugh simply because you are a fool."

"Is that the only reason?"

"Yes. But that is reason enough."

"Can you make them stop laughing at me? Can you force them — all, every one of them — not to laugh at me?"

"Yes, I can. I can stop it at once. Let me go and they will never laugh at you again."

"Never? Are you certain?"

"Let me go and I promise you that they will never — not even smile. I can do it and I will."

"Now listen to me, you ugly bones. We are making a bargain and I am going to let you go but if you don't keep your word with me, then the next time I run into you, nothing will help you. Nothing at all. Now you lie still and I will loosen the poles and when you get up you better keep away from me or I will splinter you to bits. Here now . . . There you are. And don't slap any trees. Run! And your promise, too — don't forget your promise."

III

That evening, Simon told the story of what happened in the woods and now the whole town shrieked with laughter.

"So that's what he said and that's what you said. Ha ha! tell it again, Simon. Tell it again. As you were cutting poles, there before you, he was asleep and you could look right through his bones and see the grass beneath. And then you went up to him and speared him through. Right through, — ha ha! Right through the middle. What did you call it? The

ribs. Yes, ha ha! Right between the ribs; and then you wedged in a second and a third. That must have nailed him down all right. And then you sat down beside him and lit your pipe. Ha ha! Go on, Simon. Tell it again. It's a good one. Listen, everybody! Ha ha!"

"That's all right. You don't have to believe me if you don't want to. And you need not laugh about it either. I saw it and . . . I speared him, and I told you what happened. But I didn't tell you the end. Yes, I let him go and I knew you would laugh at me. I knew it and I let him get away. If I had him here now tied in a bag, you would not be laughing. But I let him go because I know the time is soon to come when you will all stop laughing. Soon. Then nobody will laugh at me. Nobody. You just wait and see."

The skeleton kept his word. The very next evening as Simon was sitting quietly in his cottage he heard a hard, bony knock at his door. Before him stood the skeleton and he could see the landscape beyond through his bones.

"I am here to keep my promise. Run to your friend the tailor. Run at once and tell him to make himself ready for he is about to die."

"Oh, no. I saw him only this morning and he looks fine and . . ."

"Do as I order, fool. Run at once for he will die tonight."

"Tonight?"

"Yes. Run at once."

When these words were spoken the skeleton skipped across the field and was soon out of sight. He ran so fast that the wind made a whistling sound through his bones, and long after he was out sight Simon could hear the rattling click of his nimbly jumping bones.

As he stood in the doorway of his cottage he wondered why he had been chosen to bring this message to the tailor.

"They will only laugh at me again," he said, as he took his old hat down from the rack. Then he paused for a moment to light his pipe before he wandered down to the tailor's shop in the village.

The happy tailor, with his old red vest, was sitting cross-legged on his work table, surrounded by his stuffs and the tools of his trade. He sat like a little sultan on a cushioned dais. Simon entered, greeted him and began -- but he really did not know how to begin.

"Good evening. I came to tell you . . . you are going . . . I saw the skeleton again this evening. He came to my door and . . ."

"Hey, Charlie," called the jolly tailor. "Come in here, Charlie. Hurry up. Simon is here. He is telling a new story about the skeleton. Call the boys. Wait a moment, Simon. Wait until Charlie comes over. Ha ha! So he came to your door this time. That starts off good. That is different anyway. Wait until they arrive. Call the shoemaker, somebody. Come in here! Sit down, Simon. Make yourself at home. Here is a chair, but don't sit on the Mayor's vest. Tee hee! This is going to be good. Ha ha!"

In less than a minute a crowd was assembled and Simon told how the skeleton appeared before him that evening and ordered him to run to the tailor and tell him to make himself ready. This was followed by loud peals of laughter. The happy little tailor rolled up his sleeves and showed the muscle in his arms.

"I guess that ought to prove something. Ha ha!"

Then one of the boys took hold of the measuring tape and began stretching it along the work bench as though he

were finding out the length of boards necessary for a proper box in which to bury the tailor. The little man in the red vest perched on the table only kicked him aside as he shook with laughter.

"The old boy's still got a kick in him," someone remarked.

Now they laughed again and again, but the tailor laughed the most. He seemed to enjoy it more than anyone.

"Tell it again, Simon," he called. "Tell it again. It's a good one. Short and sweet. You heard the bones whistle and you also heard them click as he ran. How fast did he run? Come now, tell it again. He knocked on the door, a hard knock, and when you opened it, there he stood, — that's how it begins."

But Simon would not repeat the story. He put on his hat and departed.

As soon as he was gone the men looked at each other and again began laughing. They laughed until they held their sides from the sheer pain of it. The little tailor laughed so much that tears came into his eyes.

"Did you ever hear bones whistle?" one asked. And at this they all laughed once more.

"The bones also clicked," added one.

"He should be on the stage."

"He takes the prize."

"And I was just thinking — tee-tee — how the fool said he could look between his ribs and see everything. No muscles, no skin or flesh, no innards — just bones. That's pretty good isn't it!"

Again they laughed. The tailor himself laughed so hard that he had to cough. He put his head down low and suddenly he became very red and coughed and coughed.

"Slap him on the back!"

"Hard! Slap him smart."

"He swallowed through the wind-pipe. That's nothing."

"It's a bone in my throat," whispered the tailor between his violent coughs. "It sticks like a fish bone."

"Bring a glass of water."

"Make him eat bread. That will force it down."

But the tailor coughed on and on until he grew blue in the face. And, when all home remedies failed, they decided to call the doctor. The young fellow, who only a few minutes before amused himself with the tape measure, now dashed through the streets to the house of the doctor.

Now the poor tailor was gasping for breath and struggling for life. They could not wait for the doctor. They could not wait another minute, so they took him up and ran with him through the streets. He coughed as they ran.

They arrived at the house just as the boy was urging the doctor to hurry. He took off his coat and worked hard over the little tailor. But it was all in vain.

"It's too late," he said at length. "It's too late. You brought him to me too late. He was already dead when you arrived. I could not hear his heart beat but I did think there was a chance, because I heard — when I listened very closely — I heard a dry little click. You brought him too late."

IV

Once more, as Simon was smoking his pipe, he heard the loud, bony knock at his door. Before he had time to rise, the door swung open, as though by itself, and there stood the skeleton — large as life, white as alabaster and grim as death.

"There you are again," called Simon. "What is it now?"

"Now it is your sister. Run, Simon, and tell your rich sister that she has accumulated all the money and possessions that she may have. Tell her to make ready. Go to her as you went

to the tailor. If they do not believe you at first they will later. Her end is near."

"No, no. That can't be so."

"Why not?"

"Because my sister . . . I saw her only yesterday and she has tickets for a concert next Sunday. She is very careful and she would never have bought tickets that she could not use. It would break her heart to lose them . . . She has the tickets."

"Simon, you are still a simple fool. But I will keep my word with you and soon nobody will laugh at you. Do as I order. Run to your sister and have her make herself ready."

Simon went as he was directed.

"You are the very person I wanted to see. Sit down, Simon," said his sister as he walked across the polished floor of the big stone house.

"I came to . . ."

"Sit down here, it is more comfortable. I was just thinking about you as you walked in."

"What were you thinking about me for?"

"Because I want to talk to you about the little woods down by the swamp. You know I bought the Hill Farm last week?"

"Yes. I heard you did."

"Well. You see I have Colt's Farm and Bubbling Spring lands and now I have bought the Hill Farm, and you know on the other side where the Old Mill stands, well, they had to take out a second mortgage this autumn and it looks bad for them. Then I will have that place, too, and . . ."

"But what has that to do with my little woods?"

"Well, that is just it. You see, Simon, I hear all kinds of strange stories about the woods. Besides it cuts into the very middle of all my lands. As it is, my lands are almost all around you."

"The Old Farm where we were born should by rights be mine."

"You are a fool, Simon. You are hopeless. How many times did I explain to you that we bought it from you, but instead of giving you money for it we gave you stocks in a company which were much more valuable. They are in the bank in your name."

"But I was told they are not worth anything."

"You don't understand. Today they might not be worth very much but tomorrow they might take on great value. I am really tired of trying to explain things to you. But get it out of your head. The Old Farm belongs to me and now if I can get the Torrent's place, then I will be completely around you."

"That's good. I will keep an eye on it for you."

"Don't be a fool, Simon. The woods will be no good to you for even now they do you no good. I hear strange stories about the woods. It is full of all kinds of strange things. There are skeletons and all sorts of things running about loose."

"Yes. And I saw him again tonight."

"Who?"

"My skeleton."

"That is right. You see I am right. Better sell the woods and be rid of it. I will pay you well for them because they are in the middle of . . . I do not want the Mayor to get hold of them — and I know he has his eye in that direction — and if you ever fell into his hands, then heaven help you."

"No. I cannot sell you the woods tonight because — because I came here to . . ."

"Now don't make it final. Let us rather say that you will think it over and let me know next week. I am myself very busy at the moment. You see we are having a concert next Sunday and I am having two dresses made, one in jet black

to show off the large emerald I bought last month. You have not seen it yet and I am sorry I cannot show it to you tonight for it is locked up with the silver. And speaking of silver, you know the Mayor's wife has bought a silver service twice as large as mine and . . ."

"But I came to tell you something."

"Oh, yes. I did want to say something. I thought of you when I bought the tickets for the concert. I should have taken one for you but I can still get another, only you must let me know tomorrow without fail about the little woods, and if everything is all right . . ."

"But I came to tell you . . . Never mind about the tickets. I want no tickets and you will not be able to use your own. You will not go to the concert because I came to tell you that you are going to die."

"What a fool you are!" She laughed in his face. "I hope you do not think I am a simple tailor. You can't take me in with fancy stories about a skeleton."

"Yes, I saw him tonight. And he said you will die."

"Really, Simon, I do not like your jokes. Now run along and come back tomorrow and let me know about the woods. Think it over."

But that very night a burning fever took possession of her scheming brain, and on Saturday morning, surrounded by all her lands and all her worldly belongings, she lay dead.

V

The news traveled quickly. The school teachers spoke to each other about these strange happenings. The tradespeople whispered to each other and made great mystery of the events, while the housewives just babbled away in endless streams. All were agreed on one point: "Simon was in league with death."

But nobody laughed at him. Even more than this; he was now spoken of as "Mister Simon," and the words were said with a good deal of respect. The skeleton had kept his promise.

Yet not content with this, once more came the knock of the bony knuckles on Simon's door. This time it was the Mayor that had to be told to make himself ready.

The front doors of the bank were already closed and Simón had to go around through the yard. The day's work was done and the Mayor was seated at his desk making up the accounts.

"It's too late to draw anything today," he said without looking up.

"I came to warn you."

"Warn me!"

"Yes. I saw the skeleton and — make yourself ready."

"No, no! He won't get me. You are joking with me. You are sure?"

"Yes. I am sure."

"No. It can't be. You are trying to . . . You can't blame me for those stocks. It's no fault of mine that they are now worthless. We can deliver them to you if you demand to see them. No. I can't be blamed for that. Those were the chances you took. Everything in life is a gamble. And life itself . . . Tell the truth — is it about that?"

"No. He said, you. Make ready for you will die."

"He won't get me! You will see if he will. He won't get me!"

And saying this he jumped from his chair and bolted out through the yard as fast as his thick, fleshy legs could carry him.

"Run for your life," called Simon after him. "Run!"

And he ran from the yard to the street and from the street to the stable. Here a horse was quickly saddled. The Mayor hurriedly mounted and, snatching a whip from the rack, lashed into the animal. For a moment the horse stood up with his

forefeet in the air before he plunged through the open door of the stable. Off they rode.

Up the street and through the lane, then down across the meadow and into the road that passed through Simon's wood. Here the horse suddenly shied and reeling in the air almost threw the rider, but the Mayor jerked at the bridle and with his heels kicked into the belly of the beast. Half a mile ahead they struck the turnpike road down which they galloped.

The Mayor whipped the horse across the neck and under the belly. He cut him over the head and lashed into his flanks. The hoofs pounded the road, all four beating as one. The heavy foam from the mouth of the beast flew back and spattered the Mayor's arms and face. But they raced on and on.

"He won't get me! He won't get me!"

They passed Long Ridge and the Old Mill Town.

"He won't get me!" And again and again he lashed the whip into the racing animal.

They passed Three Towns and with one leap they crossed the bridge at the dam and now they were riding through the dusk, pounding down the road towards the lights of the city.

A heavy cloud of dust rose up behind them.

They raced on.

The nostrils of the pulsing animal ran red with blood. The rider's whip whistled through the air.

"Come on, Jack! He won't get me. He won't get me!"

The pounding hoofs now broke into a double beat. Double, double, pounding double like the roll of a drum. It echoed through the valley and across the hills and far away.

Covered with sweat from neck to hoof, bleeding from nostrils, mouth, and from the veins cut on his belly, blowing clouds of vapor before him and raising the dust of the road behind, the poor beast at length broke into a trot.

"Come on, Jack! He won't get me! Another mile, Jack. Whoa! What's wrong, Jack? Stone in your hoof. That's easy. Whoa! I'll fix it for you, — but he won't get me. Whoa!"

The horse stopped and the rider was about to descend when he felt something hard pinching his shoulder. Slowly and terror stricken he turned his head and there, seated directly behind his saddle, was the skeleton.

"Turn back, Mayor," said the voice of Death. "Turn back home."

The Mayor crouched low over the foam-covered neck of the horse. Now he turned him, and slowly they wended back their way. His heart beat with a double skip and the bridle in his hands shook and rattled the rings in the horse's bit. A cold perspiration came over him and his face took on a frozen expression of horror. The road seemed endless.

At length, reaching the door of his house he fell from the saddle and without daring to turn about he staggered into the house. Soon the doctors arrived, but day by day he grew more ashen, until at length, life left his full-blooded body and the fierce struggle was done.

VI

Sometime later Simon was again in the woods gathering branches and he heard the dry click of the bones of the skeleton. He turned around and found his old friend standing in the dark hollow of a dead tree. His white bones stood out like chalk-lines on a blackboard.

"There you are again," called Simon.

"But I kept my word with you, haven't I?"

"Yes."

"Nobody dares laugh, do they?"

"Nobody laughs now."

"They would believe anything you said, wouldn't they?"

"Yes."

"You might have taken a slight advantage of it."

"I never thought of doing so."

"You remain the fool."

"Yes, I must be a fool because I cannot understand."

"What is it you can't understand."

"I do not know why people are so afraid to die."

"It is because they are afraid to live."

"Is it such a terrible thing to die? Tell me skeleton, is it really a bad thing that you come into when you die? The row of black trees must know the secret but they cannot speak. But you also must know. Tell me, what is it like?"

"Would you really like to see?"

"Yes."

"And you are not afraid?"

"No."

"And supposing I give you a tiny glimpse of what lies beyond and then you do not awake and remain there always?"

"It should not matter much because — because I have so little. Nothing really belongs to me here . . . I mean, I should not mind."

"You are truly a fool. Come here. Come into the hollow of this tree and sit down with your back against the dead wood.

"I will rub a twig across your eyes and for a few moments you will enter into the place where, in the end, all must go. But remember one thing; you must never tell what you have seen. You are free to say that you have entered into the beyond and that you have returned. That alone, and nothing more. This you must promise me."

"I promise. I promise."

Simon seated himself in the hollow of the tree and leaned back against the rotting trunk. The skeleton moved forward. He broke a little green twig and brushed it against the eyes of the fool. When the twig fell from his fingers it was already dry and brown.

Simon's eyes were closed but he saw through them. He saw before him the bright, liquid greens of the forest. He saw the heavy dark trunks of the trees and the breeze-blown foliage. Everything seemed the same but somehow it was different.

Around him all seemed to contract and grow smaller; so small that it resembled a fine miniature scene carved in the inside of a cube of sugar. How he himself, so awkward and clumsy, could fit into so small and delicate a place he did not know. But there he was and he was smaller than the tiniest object in the scene.

The trees had lost their black and had turned to long gray columns that reached as high as one could see. The bark seemed made of rings that were constantly moving upward. The surfaces of these columns were rough and in texture resembled cigarette ash. In fact the whole scene took on a hue that was neither warm nor cold; nothing was fully white and nothing black. And there was nothing that seemed really hard and nothing soft.

The air was so still that one did not need to breathe and the ground, made of a kind of moss carpet, was smooth and flat, but with a slight incline. No place was really level. That was why one always walked down and into the scene. The path one took was never a straight one, for some of the columns were so great that it took a long time to go around. But one could never be lost for always the way was known by the slope of the ground.

But the ground had nothing of the earthy look. There were

no stones, no pebbles, no sand, no little pieces of bark or fragments of dried leaves. There was no dust, and it all seemed fragrant like the sap of a sweet tree. It seemed fragrant but that fragrance was felt without breathing.

Why were the columns moving upward so fast? Where were the tops? Why was the foliage invisible? And the sky?

Simon looked above him but as far as he could see there was no sky. High above him the columns seemed to fuse and arch together. They closed in above and sealed all beneath into great naves, as though they were great roots pushing upwards and arching over to hold up the floor of the world. And the light? The light seemed to come from the water that bubbled in brilliant pools around the base of each growing shaft.

He listened closely. The water bubbled without making any noise. All was silent. And in the distance he could see figures; other people like himself walking around the endless columns but always with the slope of the ground, always downward. And all were single and alone and solitary.

Simon wanted to reach out and touch one of the large growing shafts but he was unable to raise his arm. He looked down and to each of his large clumsy fingers was fastened a little baby's hand. Each finger was clutched by a little warm hand. That is all that he could see. Five little hands were leading him on and on. They pulled him gently on and prevented him from touching the ash-like columns. He could see the fat little fingers, the little dimples and the creased wrists. Every now and then he thought he saw a little arm, but the children themselves, who must have been there, were quite invisible.

The inclined road seemed to press on from behind and the little hands, that held so affectionately, led on and on around the silent bubbling pools of water at the base of each growing shaft.

Did a new shaft grow up with each visitor? Was there one shaft for every soul dead? Was this vaulted forest the final home?

Simon awoke with a sudden start. The skeleton stood before him. And behind the bleached bones he saw his own little woods. How different it all was. Real colors and forms. Sounds of the leaves in the breeze and the notes of the birds filled his ears. The pleasant odor, the rotting wood of the hollow tree, filled his nostrils.

The skeleton shook his finger at him. "Your promise! Don't forget your promise."

VII

In the world of death he had seen many things but he kept his word. He told that he had been to the place beyond and that he had returned. This much and no more.

How strange! The only man in the whole world who had seen death was nothing but a fool!

He knew something that was really vital — something that was closed to the rest of mankind. People came from far and wide to catch a tiny glimpse of this remarkable person. They tried to look into his eyes to see if they would discover — to see if they could only find out — or in some way learn the great secret of death. But now he looked out at these visitors with a weary and graver eye.

Simon grew lonesome and sad. Days meant nothing and nights meant nothing. He was alone with his secret. And the children of the town were frightened and ran from him.

At night he often walked the village streets merely to look into the gay cottage windows. But the people feared him and closed their shutters when it was whispered about that he was seen strolling through the streets. The dogs barked at his heels

and soon it was impossible for him to hear a cheerful voice. Laughter was no longer for him. Silence alone belonged to him; silence and nothing else.

Often he wandered aimlessly in his little woods always looking through the trees in search of something that he seemed unable to find. Months, months and years: "But where is he? Oh! Where is he!" he whispered. But the interlocking branches above him only swished softly against the cloud-streaked sky.

Years had passed. But at last, once more he heard the hard rattling click of the bones of death. Simon ran through the woods and found him seated on an old log. He sank to his knees before the skeleton.

"I am Simon. Look at me! I am your fool. But if you have any pity left in you then save me. Save me now. Save me from what I have become."

"I have kept my word with you."

"Yes, yes. I know."

"My promise is fulfilled."

"I know. I know. It is true. Nobody dares laugh at me, nobody. And even the children — they run away. I was once a fool but now I am looked upon as a wise man. In their eyes I have become a sage. But I am lonely and I am sad. I am unhappy."

"Why should you be happy? Why! Twice you pinned me down in these woods. Twice you worried me as only a fool could."

"I did not know. Really. I did not know."

"Twice I lay helpless before your silly pranks, and I who was stronger than life itself was forced to bargain with you."

"I did not know."

"And I offered you gold and jewels but you only laughed

at them. And you laughed at me. I offered you riches, I offered you a fortune equal to any but you only laughed. You laughed at it all but you did not want others to laugh at you. This was the jest you wanted stopped. And this I did. I stabbed it to the heart. I have made you appear a wise man. I turned you into a mock sage. I have shown you a vista that nobody living has ever beheld. They do not laugh at you because I have hidden your foolish carcase with a cloak that resembles wisdom. This I have done, for this was your desire and this was also my revenge! Why should you be happy!"

"Yes, it is true. But rescue me from what I have become. On my knees I beg you."

"What do you now want?"

"I want to be a fool again."

"But they will laugh at you."

"Let them laugh. I want everyone to laugh at me and shout and call mocking names after me. And the children too; I want to be friends again with them just as we were long ago. If I could only hear them laugh again! My days are empty and sad without it and lonely as unto death. Give me back the fool that was in me for he is mine, he belongs to my nature and I can understand him. The rest does not matter. Let me finish the days of my life as they were before — before I found you asleep in the woods. Let the children laugh and let me be happy again."

Once more the skeleton, like a wizard bent out of white wires, worked his miracle. Simon once more became the fool.

He has become old and carries a staff to which are fastened little bells. If anyone should take notice of him he will shake the stick and the children, who follow him about everywhere, will shout for joy. All because he is a fool.

VIII

A year or so later he again heard the hard sharp knock at his door. There stood the skeleton and the setting sun cast a bright glow over his polished white bones.

"Simon," he called. "There is someone sleeping in your woods."

"Who is it?"

"Come, we will go together and see who he may be."

"Let him rest there if he likes. There is no harm done."

"Come. Together we will drive him off."

"No. It is late now and soon it will be dark."

"Come, I will lead you. I know the way."

"Let him rest. It is not worth the trouble."

"It is no trouble. It is sport. Come, we will find out who it is. Come, you fool!"

Simon took his hat and together they went out into the woods.

"There is nobody here."

"We will find him," said the skeleton. "I am certain he is here somewhere."

Soon it was dark. They tramped from one path to another.

"There is nobody here."

"He is here."

"It is dark to see."

"I will lead the way."

They tramped on. A ghostly fog hung low in the air and swept between the trees.

"I am growing weary and there is nobody here."

"If you are weary then surrender to the only possible rest."

"It would be foolish to rest here. We could go back."

"As foolish as you have been in life, so foolish you can never be again."

"It is so quiet here."

"Silence is the deepest of all depths. Defeat the proudest of all orders. Despair is only a love for evil and hope the great betrayer. Come. Forget it all and together we will tramp on looking for the one who is resting."

"But there is nobody here."

"Soon. Soon we will find him."

They tramped through the dark. The white bones of the skeleton now and again seemed lost in the heavy mist. Soon all was lost.

In the morning children came playing in the woods. While throwing handfulls of golden leaves at each other, they found Simon, cold and dead.

A LITTLE WALK

by

Alvah C. Bessie

As he read he could hear the clock ticking in the bedroom, and he recalled that every time the little house was empty the clock suddenly began to tick loudly enough to be heard throughout the first floor. He always listened to the passage of time. In a few minutes — the end of the chapter — he could get up and look at the clock and find out what time it was; then he would know how long she had been gone. He looked up from the page and out the window; the rain had turned to hail.

"I'm going for a little walk down by the brook," she said, "with the kitten." A fine time for a walk, in weather like this; but he was silent. After all, four years of marriage had sanctified the custom. He sighed. "All right; be careful," and turned to his book. She wore a tan jacket.

Four o'clock. Two hours now. A little walk. Dark clouds soared over the hills and lay over the valley. The sleet rattled on the window-pane, and he watched it bounce on the sill. That was four years ago — the night we were married. She had moved into his furnished room, and as they were too poor to buy a bed and it was impossible to double up in the narrow cot, he had laid the mattress on the floor, and they slept on that . . .

. . . At three a. m. he woke with a start to find her gone. Leaping to his feet, he lit the light and looked around. Marriage-night. Her bags and books had not yet come, so all she had brought with her was gone — her coat, hat, purse. He looked frantically about for a note. He looked out the window. The street-lamps were dim in the fog and footsteps echoed on the pavement and re-echoed off the walls of the rooming-houses. Sitting in the chair, still drugged by sleep, he tried to remember whether he had said anything that might have angered her, caused her to repent their marriage — she had left him. He fought off the definite knowledge that her walks at night were a habit of long standing, dating from her arrival in New York, lonely and friendless. He fought off that reassuring knowledge and tried — even hoped — to believe she had left him for good. After all, he had not wanted to marry her; he had not wanted to marry anyone. She must have felt that. Yet it happened. Telephone: "I'm sick and tired of this thing. If you want to marry me, come out to Roslyn tomorrow and I'll meet you at the store. If not, so long." Not knowing why, "I'll be there," he said. He sat by the window the rest of the night, fighting off the desire to say, To hell with it, and go to bed and sleep. He tried to feel worried, anxious, decided to call the police in the morning and fell asleep in his chair. At dawn a pebble rattled against the window-pane and there she was, standing in the gray street below, smiling and waving her hand. He was furious. "I felt like going for a walk and didn't want to wake you. That's all." "Where were you?" "I walked up and sat in Grand Central Station and talked to a man." "You sat in Grand Central Station!"

He sat by the window watching the sleet rattle against the pane and bounce off the window-sill. The wind howled around

the house and the dark clouds soared from behind the hills. The trees were bare and a few dead leaves swirled on the lawn. He listened to the loud passing of time, put down the book and lit a cigarette. He closed his eyes for a moment, then looked out again, staring across the valley to the hills . . .

. . . she went down the bank, twigs crackling under her feet. kittykittykitty. the cat looked at her and she saw its pale eyes flash, then turned again and picked her way down, setting her heels into the rotting leaf-mould. the stream rushed below and swirled on the stones; the trees across the stream rustled in the light breeze *He heard a gun* that swept down the stream-bed. a nut-hatch uttered its nasal cry, flying from the base of a spruce to the bole of a maple, where it lay flat against the bark head down, and peered at her. at the stream-edge she turned over a few flat stones, called the kitten again and stood surveying the way before her. she stepped on a wet stone, her heel catching the moss *It's 4:15 it's hunting-season* and stripping it from the stone she fell forward and her head struck a pointed crag. she lay with her face in a pool of water two inches deep. the kitten mewed, stood still, looked about, mewed again, then climbed the hill . . .

It's hunting-season now. The woods are full of men with guns hunting rabbit and partridge. Deer in two weeks. 4:15. What a fool you are — — Russell went rattling past the house in his Ford to fetch the school-children home. — — you know she went for a walk with the kitten. You can set your watch by him: 4:15 down, 4:30 back.

. . . alone, the kitten wandered vaguely up to the house and he rushed out, looked at it and cursed it for not being

able to speak. *for want of a nail the shoe was lost for want of a shoe the horse* he organized a searching-party of farmers and all night they beat the brush up and down-stream before they found her body. the hair was wet, and when they turned her over, it lay plastered across her bloody face. he fainted . . .

Another gun. Paul Svenson came rattling downhill in his old Buick touring-car, careering from side to side; the air hissed with his passing. *if a tree in the middle of a forest four square miles in extent falls* (crushing a woman under it) *and no one is near, is there a sound?* He put out the cigarette and walked up and down the room. As he walked he felt his heart pounding against his ribs and was aware of a slight feeling of nausea . . . sick to the stomach with excitement and anxiety. *all for the want of a horseshoe-nail.* The wind howled in the chimney, the leaves were sodden now and plastered to the ground . . . plastered across her face! He picked up the book, then suddenly flung it against the opposite wall and heard the binding snap; the dry glue crackle. He put on his hat and coat and gloves and went down the bank, digging his heels into the sodden mould. It was useless to shout against the rushing of the stream, but he called: "Margaret! Margaret!" and uttered the low whistle they used when one or the other was returning to the country house they now inhabited. *there could be no sound, because sound premises an instrument of perception, and if there was no one in the forest there could have been no sound because sound premises an instrument of* Twigs snapped back in his face as he trotted through the brush, peering over and under bushes and calling. He went back, hung up his coat and hat and lit a cigarette. 4:30. Now where could Russell be?

. . . them tracks go into this thicket, jeb said; then he put his hand on the other man's arm and they were both motionless. listen jeb, the man said, what chances are there fer being caught at this? i'm not fixin' to spend no three years in jail up to keene f'r killin' deer outta season. jeb laughed quietly. do as i tell ya, young feller, an' don't yew worry none. look! he pointed into the brush and they saw the tan hide of the buck . . .

It was no good trying to read. His heart pumped and pumped and the clock ticked and every minute meant one minute more and every minute meant one minute less. He heard a rat working in the walls, and the faint pleasant sound of plaster falling. 'Remember,' she said, 'just because we're getting married doesn't mean some day I might not get the notion to up and go. It's just like me.' Now where could Russell be? Here it was 4:45 and he hadn't come chugging up the hill with the school-children who always waved as they passed the house. . . . i heard yore wife died, mr. blake, so i thought as how i'd come in an' pay my respecks. that's very kind of you, he replied; i appreciate company these days, you know. now w'en *my* wife was took to the horspital in keene, they said as how she'd pull through; but w'en the case was diagnized, it begun to look diff'rent . . .

. . . he fired and they saw the buck fall and heard it kicking in the leaves and ran forward. *all for the want of a horseshoe-nail* my god! jeb said, yew killed a woman! they lifted her, laid her back, then tore open the man's shirt she was wearing and tried to listen to her dead heart. they were abashed by her naked breasts and closed the shirt. it's thet blake woman, jeb said, yew know — them city-folk as moved into the old nelson

house last summer. they carried her down the bank, across the brook and up the other side, emerging on the road, and went slowly up it in the last glow of early sunset. at the window they saw his pale face staring out . . .

He stood at the window and watched the crows flying over the Clark house down in the valley. . . . then he saw the two men coming up the road slowly, carrying something between them. he rushed out without his hat and coat and stood there staring at his wife. tears rolled down his tanned cheeks, and the men bowed their heads. it was a accident, mr. blake. i know, he said, i heard your guns . . . It was getting dark, so he lit the lamp, carefully turning the little wheel until the flame was at the right height and there was no danger of its smoking. I'll call the Clarks, I'll call the Rogers, I'll call the Murdocks, I'll call the — "My God!" he said aloud, running his fingers through his hair and walking up and down. . . . coming back from the school-house russell came on the crowd standing around the body on the road and stopped the car. she come out'n them woods an' paul svenson run 'er down. there were tears in the man's eyes as he stood between clark and rogers; i didn't mean t'hit 'er, i was drunk, i didn't mean t'hit 'er . . . He looked at the room into which she never would come again — at the life-sized picture of her hanging on the wall, with its sad, faraway expression. . . . he buried her in the little country churchyard, and lived nearby the rest of his life. people pointed him out on the roads — that's old mr. blake, they said, he's a city man come here i guess some thirty year ago. his wife died in a thunder-storm one day; she was out walkin' early 'n the mornin' an' stood under a tree durin' a sudden shower. the tree was struck an' it fell an' crushed her to death. every afternoon he goes to the church-yard an' lays some wildflowers on the grave.

done it now thirty years. but you know — he seems so cheerful — you'd never think such a terrible thing happened to him. always a smile, always a pleasant word for everyone, gives money to the school every year. oncet i ast him if he wasn't awful lonely livin' all alone an' he said, no. margaret — that was his wife's name — margaret is here all the time. i guess he's a bit cracked, i guess . . .

Now you're letting your imagination run away with you. He laughed. Now I must finally look myself squarely in the face, he thought. All these years I've been avoiding it — it explains a lot. He realized, without surprise, that he didn't much care whether she came back or not. The idea had occurred to him before, and he had glossed it over, allowed it to slip back into the recesses from which it had arisen. Inertia. I let myself be married — but my God! what could I *do* without . . .

. . . a man came up and knocked on the door. it was old murdock. *5 o'clock!* beyond he could see a rim of pale light on the hill in the west; the bare chestnuts on the ridge stood stiffly in the failing light. he could hear the train whistle from across the notch. *That means a cold winter.* i know! mr. blake, murdock said, i have some bad news for yew, an' i'm hopin' yew'll take it like a man. he smiled. you couldn't have much bad news for me, he replied, god knows, things are bad enough as they are. he laughed. no, mr. blake. murdock fingered his hat, then looked up, cleared his throat and said, mr blake, yore wife — well, old man, she was comin' up the hill a w'ile back an' paul svenson — yew know, he's always drunk — run her down with his car. i'm afraid she's hurt bad . . .

He sat down and determined to read again. Oh God! come home for Christ's sake! He was up and putting a piece

of wood on the fire, and feeling the palms of his hand sweating, he wiped them on his trousers. Never again! *Just because we're getting married doesn't mean* Where is Russell, where is he, that all our swains — Day after day, week after week, month and year after year, he would be forced to get along without her. He was lost. He looked around him and the glow of satisfaction he felt contemplating the homely objects they had gathered, left him, flowed back and out of his life like water recedes from a rock-pool on the shore when the tide goes out. Little by little the pool dried, and only a rim of bitter salt remained, caked on the edges . . . Her clothes hung in the closet, her shoes stood in a row under the dresser, her necklace hung over the door-knob, and there was the little toy razor she used to shave under — Admit it! go ahead and admit it!

He felt his brows contract, his teeth grit. "I don't care!" he said aloud. "See if I care — stay away you god-damned . . ." Her shoes under the dresser, her necklace over the door-knob, her fountain pen on the table, and all the letters tied with a blue ribbon and all the letters bound with a broad elastic band, lying in the drawer with the picture of her as a little girl, dressed in white, sitting in the swing under the apple-tree . . .

She whistled under the window, the low, three-noted call they used, and she said, "Kittykittykitty!" and came in. He was facing her as she entered, his hands clenched at his sides, his teeth gritted. She smiled at him and he went red in the face and cried:

"Now for Christ's sake, where were you?"

"Why I went for a little —"

"I know, you went for a little walk *down the stream.* That was three hours ago . . ."

"No," she said, "only two . . ."

"I looked for you down the stream, but —"

"I know. I went up the stream for a change."

"Didn't you have sense enough to come back when it hailed? In this weather! Do you want to get pneumonia?" He worked himself into a frenzy and screamed at her. "Haven't you *any* consideration at all —" She looked puzzled. "Why, I dropped in at old man Murdock's, up the stream. He called me from the window and I had a glass of beer with him."

"Can't you understand! *Can't* you see —"

"Why no," she smiled. "I must confess I can't. Though I suppose it *was* inconsiderate of me."

"Hump!" he said, snorting through his nostrils. She came and kissed him and he sniffed again, and lit a cigarette with trembling fingers. She went into the kitchen and he heard her poking up the fire and rattling the pots. It was a victory for him, but he felt he'd lost its fruits. Russell's old Ford came slowly chugging up the steep hill, crammed with school-children dressed in bright flannels and mufflers. He stood at the window and waved to them, and they waved back eagerly. Russell lifted his hand in greeting. It was a ritual now. It didn't mean a thing. If she hadn't come back? . . . i don't know where i'll get the money for the funeral, he said. why, mr. blake, we people — the town will be only too glad to help you out till you get on your feet again. it's awfully kind of you . . .

"Margaret!" he called. "When will dinner be ready?"

MOUSSYA

by

Helena Clayton

The little town of Volkovo, peacefully situated on the low bank of the Volga, with a population of a couple of thousand and 200 miles from the nearest railway line, was typical of a provincial town of its size and location. That is, it had a main street covered with round cobbles while the side streets were conspicuous by the absence of any kind of pavement; it had three churches kept in good repair by the devoted congregations and one movie-house located in a large barn. Most of the buildings in Volkovo were one-story wooden structures which toward the outskirts of the town disintegrated into mere huts while the dozen or so buildings of brick were gathered around the main square. Near this square that served as market place on Saturday mornings resided the upper class of Volkovo.

On one corner stood the house of the wholesale grain-merchant Ivan Petrovitch Lipkin. His family consisting of his wife and four daughters occupied the three stories of their fair-sized home while the basement housed the kitchen and living quarters of the coachman and three maids.

Two members of the Lipkin household had at their birth been given the names of Maria, the youngest daughter, and the cook. Maria Lipkin, a vivacious blond in her teens, was called by everybody Moussya. The cook, who because of her

low station in life could not aspire to the appellation of Moussya, a name that breathed of grace and gentility, was called by the more common form of Maria — Masha.

Masha, who was twenty-six years old, had been an orphan since the age of five. She had known no joys of a carefree childhood or comforts of a home. As she grew up into a young girl even romance had passed by leaving her on the shady side of life. She was grateful for the shelter offered her by the Lipkin family even if this shelter was a kitchen in a basement. She went about her duties in the badly lighted kitchen, her hair tied in a ridiculous knot at the back of her head, her ill-fitted dress hanging loosely and unevenly from her stout waistline, her bare feet stuck into slippers trodden down at the heel, and the clic-clac of her footsteps sounded up to the main floor as she walked back and forth from the stove to the pantry or to the kitchen table.

The revolution that shook the country was at first slow in undermining the traditions and routine of the daily life of the inhabitants of Volkovo. When the changes came with the arrival of a detachment of the Red Guard sent to sound out and punish all counter-revolutionary actions and ideas, those changes were radical. The Lipkins fared perhaps better than most of their neighbours belonging to the handful of the town's wealthy. They submitted to the searches and confiscations performed by young soldiers who thoroughly enjoyed the task of acting the role of stern masters. Ivan Lipkin docilely went into jail; was freed upon payment of a large sum and the following day rearrested. Freed again after a second payment he yielded to the insistence of his wife and disguised as a peasant left town.

During all these comings and goings Masha stood aloof. She was deeply devoted to the Lipkins, yet in accordance with her social position and birth, she should, in this class war, have

taken the side of the newcomers. But she had no friends there. Who among them would ever think of her?

And then someone did. She found favor in the eyes of the red-headed Stenka, one of the most active members of the Red Guard. Stenka was short but squarely built, had a pair of quick eyes and seemed constantly either fighting or boasting of his own bravery. He seemed to have plenty of free time, though, and he spent it hanging around the Lipkin kitchen having Masha cook for him such delicacies which heretofore in his mind had been vaguely connected with exotic names, wicked bourgeois orgies and expensive restaurants with gypsy choruses.

Anna Pavlovna Lipkin never came to the kitchen any more and when Masha went upstairs to get her orders her manner was that of a straying but humble child. Stenka's presence in the kitchen, she tried to explain, was really a blessing. He might easily explain at Headquarters that he was watching the Lipkins himself and thus save the family from further intrusions. Masha sincerely hoped this were true though she had had no courage to suggest it to her lover.

One evening Stenka had brought friends along. After the company was seated around the kitchen table over which Masha had spread a clean cloth Stenka had what he thought was an amusing idea.

"Go upstairs, Moussya," he said to Masha, "and get us something to drink. They must have a bottle hidden some place where we couldn't find it. And tell your mistress she is to come down and serve us herself."

While Masha hesitated between the two evils of going upstairs or disobeying Stenka, the latter jumped up and ran to the steps leading to the main floor. On the upper landing he saw the figure of the youngest Miss Lipkin and called out to her:

"Get us some vodka; and your mother will come down and serve us. Did you hear, your mother!"

When Anna Pavlovna came down into the kitchen her face was pale and wore an expression of grave solemnity. As she advanced slowly, carrying high in front of her a tray on which six glasses were neatly arranged around a bottle of vodka three quarters full, her eyes were fixed upon a spot on the wall above the heads of everybody.

At the sight of her Masha had jumped up but a glance from Stenka had nailed her down again to her seat.

"You sit still, Masha!" quietly said Anna Pavlovna, putting down the tray and picking up the bottle to pour out the drinks.

"Moussya you call her, Moussya! And see that you don't forget, or something might happen to you!" And Stenka broke out in loud laughter as if to congratulate himself on a good joke. Some of his companions joined in, others were silent but all reached out eager hands for the glasses of vodka.

In the weeks that followed Moussya grew noticeably slimmer. At Stenka's orders she had almost every night off returning late and then working till dawn to make up for the lost time in her work.

A new life had come to Moussya, new color to her complexion, new lustre to her hair. She wore her dark red Sunday dress now even when scrubbing the floor or washing greasy pans. Her shoes now were always buttoned and her step had become light and youthful. She had even ventured to put on a hat on a celebration day of the communist party.

And upstairs the Lipkins stood listless and were thinking: "Moussya . . . God help us not to forget and call her Masha by mistake."

Then one day orders came to the Red Guard to move on to the next town. The Lipkins' cook Maria was not the only

girl who went with the soldiers. When taking leave from the Lipkins she listened silently to Anna Pavlovna advising her to consider the important step she was about to undertake. Was she sure that Stenka would marry her? No, Moussya was not sure — but then all their laws were so different now . . . She knew one thing — that love had at last come her way and that nothing could keep her from the man to whom she owed this new and glorious life.

After the departure of the punitive expedition the inhabitants of Volkovo picked up their lives again or started new ones each as best he could. Ivan Lipkin returned from his exile.

The last months of this nightmare of a winter had dragged to the end. spring had come and gone and summer was already nearing its end when a young woman knocked at the kitchen door of the home of the Lipkins. She carried a bundle tied in a large red handkerchief and her whole figure from head to ankles was enveloped in a big blanket-like wrap. Timidly yet insistently she asked to be permitted to talk to Madame Lipkin in person.

When Anna Pavlovna came down and recognized Masha the latter could say nothing. Large tears were rolling down her cheeks and she tried to grab and kiss Mrs. Lipkin's hand. Anna Pavlovna's words soon quieted and reassured her:

"Now put down your bundle and take off your things. There will be room for you," and she added, "and for the baby."

On the morrow Masha had resumed her work in the kitchen and the familiar clic-clac of her footsteps, more dragging and heavier now, sounded up to the main floor.

The Lipkins were kind to her, and considerate, trying hard to remember not to call her Moussya by mistake.

SOLDIER'S SECRET

by

George Albee

The sunlight, shattered as it speared its way through the jungle of waxy magnolias and palms in the public square, burned with fierceness. The brass rims of the cafe's little marble-topped tables fended it off with an earnestness that suggested resentment and pain. Young Melville Dougherty, tasting a drink which the waiter had brought him without giving him an opportunity to order, told himself that Algiers was a bright, sharp place. Abruptly he set down the glass. A street boy in dirty cotton bloomers and a fez and nothing else, coming from behind him had suddenly dropped to the sidewalk and clutched his ankle. This was the seventh time it had happened in less than seven minutes.

"*Seen? Seen? Oui, oui, seen!*"

"Get away! *Non. Allez.* I've had a shine, can't you see? Run along. Get away!"

"*Un coup de brosse? Un coup de brosse, 'sieur? Oui, un coup de brosse!*"

"No, and no blow of the brush! *Allez! Circulez!* Here's some money. Get along."

Like other cities, Algiers evidently had its petty irritations — waiters who did not wait, and beggars who did not beg.

And drinks one could not drink, Dougherty added to himself, trying to catch the eye of the Arab barman. The barman's eye was not to be caught. He was out of sight, down behind the bar on his hands and knees, talking French baby-talk to a filthy and enraptured cur.

The man across the table laughed. "That's not the way to do it," he said, in French. He was a fellow of about forty or forty-five, stout, and with dark eyes that looked stern. His suit was cut well enough, although his necktie was cheap and overbright.

"Pardon?"

"That's not the way. If you give money to one, twenty will come."

"Where do they all come from?"

"We have thousands of them. Nobody knows who their fathers are — the wind, perhaps. Give them a box on the ear; that'll keep 'em away. You are English, monsieur?"

"I'm American."

"Ah, there's a difference! You speak French very well; the French of professors, perhaps, but it's much better than mine. American. *Tiens, tiens!* The land of millionaires!"

"Oh, not entirely." Dougherty smiled.

"I see you don't desire me to talk to you. I have not the wish to offend you, monsieur. I am a little bit lonely, sitting here, and I wish to talk with someone."

"Not at all, not at all. It pleases me. You are French, monsieur?"

"A Frank and frank, eh? Yes. That is to say, my father was Arab." Drawing a scuffed wallet from his pocket, the man handed over his card. M. Edouard Mesguich, its smeary print announced, was a travelling salesman representing Ovrier and Company, Syrups and Liquors.

"Thank you."

"That's our anisette you're drinking," Mesguich remarked. "I saw the bottle when the waiter brought it to you. If this is your first visit to Africa no doubt you find it horrible enough."

Dougherty laughed. "Horrible! Why did he bring it? Because he saw you here at the table?"

"No, not that; everyone here drinks *anis*; one becomes habituated. I don't know why. You forgive me for speaking to you, monsieur? You don't think I'm a guide?"

"But not at all! I'm enchanted. My name is Dougherty. One can't say it in French."

"You are genteel. From what part of America do you come, monsieur? I am curious — a bit too curious, one says, perhaps."

"But no. I'm from California."

"*Californie.* That's at the side of Mexico, isn't it?"

"To the north."

"What kind of a country have you down there?"

"It's surprisingly like North Africa. That is to say, the southern end of the state is. To the north we have magnificent forests; there are trees one calls redwoods, which have thousands of years; one cuts a road for automobiles through a single tree."

"*Tiens!* We have a tree called redwood, also, but it's nothing so grand as that."

"It is difficult to believe, I understand well. I'll send you a photograph when I return home."

Mesguich chuckled. "Each of us thinks the other distrusts him. We are honest men, evidently."

"*Oui.*"

"You voyage for pleasure, Monsieur?"

Again Dougherty nodded.

"My voyages don't take me far. I go to the east as far as Tunis, and to the south across the desert to Ghardaya. Before you quit Africa, monsieur, you must traverse the mountains to see Ghardaya, or at least Bou-Saada. Bou-Saada — it's 'Father Of Happiness', that. The town is well named. The tribe down there is peaceful and happy and gentle. Ghardaya I can't describe. It is necessary that one should be a painter. In your voyages you have perhaps seen the Taj Mahal? I have seen no more than photographs of it, but in spite of that Ghardaya resembles the Taj Mahal. You come upon it from a hundred miles of open desert, and the white towers shoot up from the sand like white fountains. The sky is a very dark blue."

"*Mon Dieu!* Ah, yes, I must see that! You love it here, don't you?"

Mesguich pursed his broad red lips. "I love it anywhere."

"Really?"

"Really. I'm telling you."

"There aren't many like you, you know."

"No. They don't know the secret."

Dougherty repeated the word, thoughtfully. "It is a secret, isn't it?"

"*Oui!* There was a time when I didn't know it. I learnt it during the war. You were too young for the war, monsieur?"

"I could have battled if I had made the attempt. I did not make it."

"You aren't crazy." Mesguich twirled the stem of his glass between his blunt, strong brown fingers. "It's pretty when they put the water into it, *anis*. This looks like a moonstone, doesn't it? I was wounded four times in that dirty pig of a war. *Voyez*, the first." He held out his hand. "That was clean; a rifle ball of high velocity. I was back in the trenches in three days, with a bandage." He sat sidewise on his chair and swung up one

foot, in a black shoe with a grey top and glass buttons. "Shrapnel, the second; through the foot. That kept me out for three weeks. I had almost stopped limping when they sent me back. I asked if I could have a crutch, and they told me one might use one's rifle. But this is boring you, monsieur — the brave showing his wounds! I ask your pardon."

"You don't need to, I assure you."

"*Alors*, the third was shrapnel also. We were making the attack and I lost my helmet, and a ball did winter sports on top of my head. That was a close thing. They put my roof back on at the hospital, and I was back in the trenches in four weeks. We had need of men at the instant."

"Good God!"

"The next time I found a bayonet. Ah, that's a beauty! Ah, it's pretty, truly, that one! It was another attack. We ran across the field and jumped into the Boches' trench. One of them saw me in the air. He mounted his rifle. All he had to do was hold it up; I did the rest myself. Oh, I was an apple-on-a-stick that time, there is no doubt. *Voyez*, I'll show you!" Careless of passersby, Mesguich sprang to his feet, pulled up his waistcoat, and jerked out a lavender shirt-tail. Wandering crookedly through the black hair of his belly, there was a scar a foot long. "It's pretty, isn't it? When they put me on the operating-table the surgeon said, 'Well, my boy, they dug you up for me. You're dead a long while.'"

A pair of bearded professional men at the nearest table shrugged and returned to their game of *tric-trac*. A white-robed Arab, who had paused on the sidewalk to see what was going on, smiled and strolled away.

"And you went back to the trenches?" asked Dougherty.

"*Oui.*"

"You make me sad."

"There were sad things. Has anyone told you of Verdun, Monsieur? That was something."

"Tell me."

"All the brave soldiers attacking! That is not true. I, who have every medal, I tell you there is no such thing as a brave soldier, monsieur. I never had a brave hour. Perhaps at Paris you have encountered in the high world someone of the Chabon family? No? It's a good family; they have been officers in the wars of France three hundred years. Little Georges Chabon was our lieutenant. He had nineteen years. He'd come along the trench and say, 'Well, fellows, let's go,' and over we'd go. We attacked because if we retreated we'd be killed and if we stayed where we were we'd be killed. When we went forward there was a chance not to die, so we went forward. That was why we attacked, monsieur."

"I understand."

"I thought I could tell you about it. I can't. Here's something that may give you the idea. Through all the war I had a friend. Four years we were together, and neither of us dead. It was something, that. He had my name, Edouard. When we attacked at Verdun, we were together both the two, running through the bombardment. You have seen the field? It was a plain of mud, that's all. Ahead of us we saw a little hole. There was an old piece of corrugated iron lying over it. It was a place of safety. That is to say, it wasn't safe at all, because a shell would go through it like paper; still, there was a hole. Edouard and I made a race. I got there first, and when I screwed down into the mud there was no more room. Edouard lay outside slapping my legs. 'Let me in! Let me in!' I did not let him in, monsieur. No, monsieur — I kicked my friend in the face."

A waiter came to the table, stood for a moment, and trotted away.

Mesguich sighed, and raised his dark eyes to the trees in the square. The great, heavy magnolia blossoms, pale lamps shining with the light of the yellow candles at their centers, were alabaster that lived and trembled. "When I was in that, monsieur, I told myself that all that mattered was to live. If one had breath, that was everything."

"You had reason."

"I have not changed. No! If I am a salesman — good! If I am a street-washer — good! If I am a little bootblack — good! All good! I have breath! There is nothing more to desire!"

Mesguich drew a long, deep breath. His eyelids drooping, he smiled. And he struck himself on the chest, savagely, joyously, with his strong heavy fist, rumpling the necktie which no longer seemed too bright.

BLESS ME, FATHER

by

Maurice N. O'Brien

It was uncomfortably warm in the classroom. The June sun poured through the glass of the large windows, lighting up the smooth varnish of the desks and benches. Eugene O'Conor loosed his necktie and unbuttoned the collar of his soft white shirt. A tall pale youth of seventeen, he sat with his left elbow on the desk top, his long pointed chin resting in his cupped hand. His nervous feet beat a light devil's tattoo on the soft wood floor and his forehead was wrinked.

Father Ryan called his name twice before he noticed and the stout pimpled student on his left tittered derisively as O'Conor got to his feet quickly, flushing.

"Now, Eugene," said the priest indulgently, "suppose you tell the class how the Church vindicates itself in regard to the Inquisitions."

The boy floundered. He wasn't interested; other matters filled his mind. Why did he have to call on me? he asked himself resentfully.

"I'm afraid I am not prepared," he ended and sat down sullenly.

The priest raised his eyebrows slightly. Really, for such an exceptional student, O'Conor had not been doing well lately.

He would speak to him after the class. Brace him up a bit. He said nothing further to the boy and went on to explain the point in question to the drowsy class.

O'Conor continued to brood, still nervously tapping the floor with his feet. He had come to school a bit early that morning and loitered at the Bulletin Board for a few moments. It had been an unpleasant shock to him; he hadn't kept track of the date. The words of the notice, so commonplace to the others, had seemed to enlarge under his gaze, expanding inside his head until they filled the remotest recesses of his brain.

"All students will report to the chapel after classes for confession, in preparation for the general communion tomorrow, the First Friday of month."

The dreaded denouement. He sweated with fear as his morbid imagination projected on his consciousness exaggerated and terrible impressions of his guilt-stained soul. Over his shoulder seemed to peer menacingly a figure of retribution in the form of a huge, ham-handed, black-cassocked monk. Strangely, it seemed to him, this apparition of his tortured brain had the ugly face of Father Ryan, every detail of which was magnified and caricatured, although recognizable: the rich, almost choleric complexion; bulbous sensual nose; beady black eyes, sometimes malevolent, most of the time oilily impassive; heavy loose lips which spread widely when he talked, helping to give his expressive voice resonance; bullet head with short clipped black hair; square bluish chin and thick bull neck.

If he only had another kind of sin to confess! He regarded the pimpled student resentfully. He will always confess easily, O'Conor thought; he hasn't the strength or fire to sin deeply anyway.

He tried to picture himself confessing to Father Ryan but in each mental construction of the scene, when he came to

the part where he was to bare his heart and soul, his imagination stopped short. How could he ever look the priest in the face again once he told him? And, of course, his voice would be recognized. Should he feign illness and go home before the confessions were held? No, that was out of the question; he had done so the last First Friday. Thank God, he would be graduated in a few weeks and there would be no future occasions like this. Perhaps — his thoughts were interrupted by the class bell. The students, suddenly wakened from a general torpor, collected their books and began to leave the room. Father Ryan was at his desk addressing him.

"I should like to see you for a few minutes."

The boy nodded and followed his teacher to the front where they stood in silence until the classroom was empty.

The priest cleared his throat and spoke reprovingly.

"I have been disappointed in you of late, Eugene. Your work has not been so good as usual. You seem to be absent-minded. What is the trouble?"

O'Conor was silent. Father Ryan tried to make his voice hearty and friendly.

"Come now, I am trying to help you. Is there anything on your mind?"

"No, I am all right," answered O'Conor, not meeting the eyes of his questioner.

A sudden thought struck the priest. He became stern; to the boy, his manner seemed subtly menacing.

"By the way, when did you last receive communion?"

"Why, ah, two months ago."

"Two months is a long time; entirely too long. Why didn't you receive the Blessed Sacrament with the other boys on the last First Friday?"

"I was sick," said O'Conor unconvincingly.

"It is a very bad sign when anyone stays away from the Sacraments," continued the priest coldly, disregarding the boy's answer. "Of course, you are going to confession with the other students?"

It was more of a statement than a question.

"Yes, Father," answered O'Conor in a low voice.

• • •

He entered the crowded chapel and knelt with the other seniors. The nave was hushed except for an occasional light scraping of feet on the floor and benches. The stained glass windows diffused a soft caressing glow over the students, giving their fresh young countenances preternaturally grave expressions. At the front, the red sanctuary lamp burned fitfully, shedding a roseate flicker over the altar and the first rows of pews. O'Conor recalled, with a faint regret, how he had enjoyed his visits to the chapel in his previous terms at school.

The priests entered and walked gravely to their respective confessionals. Father Ryan, passing his pew with heavy tread, reminded him more than ever of some warlike monk of the middle ages; he was a compact representation of muscular Christianity.

One by one, the boys entered the confessionals and after intervals of varying lengths emerged and returned to their places, where they prayed with lowered heads.

O'Conor's palms were moist, his face flushed. His feverish thoughts turned to the cause of his trouble. Why did he have anything to do with Fisher anyway? How they had all admired the latter when he was expelled from school, investing him with the glamour of great courageous wickedness. They had been standing on the street corner one evening: Fisher, himself, Walsh, Brown and young Smythe. Two girls had passed, strolling

leisurely. Fisher had boldly spoken to one of them and she answered pertly over her shoulder, her words a challenge.

He addressed the group.

"Who's game to follow them?"

They had all hung back and he turned to O'Conor.

"How about you, Gene?"

With forced bravado he had answered:

"Sure, I'll go."

That had been the innocent enough beginning. The progressive stages in their intimacy with the girls passed quickly through his mind. Night after night they had met them, either walked in the park or had gone to the home of either of the girls. Strange forces that had been secretly frightening had taken hold over him until the night that, senses inflamed, he . . .

Eugene O'Conor had not realized the seriousness of his sin until it was brought home to him with terrifying vividness the time the visiting Jesuit had preached before the students. He had chosen for his subject, chastity, and with surprising Puritanical vigor had portrayed the violator of the sixth commandment as a vice-festered gross monster, whose lack of self control would inevitably lead to spiritual and physical ruin. He had been so profoundly affected that he had abruptly broken off relations with the surprised and chagrined girl and since then had been haunted by a formless but menacing fear of retribution.

His mind again turned to the girl. He recalled with every detail etched deeply on his imagination their most intimate relations. Strange, he mused a little rebelliously, if it had been such a great sin that he had never been conscious of anything but sensations of pleasure and an invigorating spirit of self confidence.

The fat student, who was ahead of O'Conor, came from

the confessional and with firm step and calm self-satisfied face knelt in the pew behind him.

His heart pounding, the boy entered the gloomy compartment. Should he disclose everything? The alternative was terrifying. Swallowing convulsively the lump in his throat, he opened dry lips.

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned since my last confession which was two months ago — when I said my penance and received Holy Communion. Since then, I . . ."

Monotonously, slower than was necessary, he recounted to the silent priest his lesser sins. At length, everything divulged except the important matter that filled his mind, he paused, wracked with indecision. The priest was restless.

"Is there anything else?"

The boy was silent. His confessor went on, a little impatiently.

"Have you missed Mass since your last confession?"

"No, Father."

"Have you stolen?"

"No, Father."

"Have you committed any sins against chastity?"

O'Conor's heart stood still. In an instant he made his decision. His voice was scarcely audible.

"No, Father."

"Will you speak a little louder? What was that?"

"No Father. I — have — not."

A short silence.

"Is there anything else?" again asked the priest.

"No."

The voice droned:

"For your penance, say ten Our Fathers and ten Hail Marys."

O'Conor muttered the Act of Contrition:

'*O my God! I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee, and I detest all my sins, because I dread the loss of heaven and the pains of hell, but most of all because they offend Thee, my God, who art all-good and deserving of all my love. I firmly resolve, with the help of Thy grace, to confess my sins, to do penance, and to amend my life. Amen.*'

He left the confessional, the priest's customary 'pray for me' echoing sardonically in his ears. Of what value were his prayers? he thought, fiercely scorning himself.

He was again in the pew. His natural reaction of relief that his decision was made was replaced by fear as he realized the enormity of his latest offence. He had committed a sacrilege. The word had an ominous, a terrifying sound; it seemed to threaten unspeakable, unthinkable, consequences. He repeated: a sacrilege. He had violated the holy confessional; he had lied to his confessor, representative of God. His soul shrank in fear.

• • •

Again he entered the chapel, this time in the bright morning. The newly risen sun streamed through the open tops of the chapel windows, striking slantingly across the pews, its broad shafts disclosing swirling bright bits of dust.

He knelt leadenly through the ancient impressive ceremony until the distribution of the Host. Then, panic stricken, thin lips compressed into whiteness, he walked in line with his fellow students to the altar rail. Kneeling there, he felt strangely detached and yet a creeping fear gnawed at his heart.

The pimpled student, who was at his right at the communion rail, raised slowly his bowed head and opened fat lips to receive the Host. The priest, mumbling in Latin, was before O'Conor.

"*Corpus Domini nostri Jesu Christe . . .*"

His stiffened jaw creaked open; he felt the dry unpalatable wafer on his tongue . . .

"*custodiat animan tuam in vitam aeternam. Amen.*"

. . . and closed his mouth spasmodically. He swallowed the unleavened bread with an effort, his tense throat resisting fiercely. Symbolic, he thought.

Walking back mechanically to his pew, he knelt abjectly, in the throes of a deep self loathing.

But one question kept drumming at his brain. Why had he not been struck down from above as he took the sacred Host in his guilty lips? Why? Why? Why? The word beat obstinately at his consciousness, beat with the rhythm of his pounding pulse, beat like the shock of waves of ocean undermining and leveling a hillock of sand and it undermined and destroyed the great hulking fears of his adolescence. After a time, an oppression seemed to lift from his heart; his pulse grew calmer and calmer grew his thoughts and amid the soothing peace of the quiet chapel, his soul made a few faint stirrings, waking slowly and with care from its long long dormancy.

THE GRAND SALON

by

Helen Todd

I was in the wrong one. The wrong lavatory. It really was careless after what she'd said. I wasn't usually unkind or discourteous. Although naturally an egoist, I have found it more comfortable to follow my grandmother's advice and not hurt other people's feelings when it wasn't absolutely necessary. Now just by coming into the middle one instead of the second on the left I'd caused a tragedy. I was so ashamed I didn't dare come out. It was ten minutes now — ten minutes since I'd opened the wrong door. I really must collect the courage to come out and face Mlle. Thiery. One couldn't just sit there doing nothing. Even making animals out of the paper got boring after another six minutes. No hope of her coming to the door and rebuking me for my mistake, even if I sat there all morning. She'd be far too hurt. It was a second offence.

As soon as I came out it was as I'd expected. The little old lady, the lavatory attendant, didn't say anything, didn't even look at me reproachfully, but just sat in a corner quietly weeping.

It was obvious that when one had ruined another human being's social success for at least a week apologies would be useless. So I just crept away resolving to bring some pink

carnations for the second on the left next time I came. Pink carnations would be the obvious peace offering. They would suit the second on the left perfectly. It was reserved for the more effeminate type of intellectuals, pure Eighteenth Century. The walls were painted in a very pale mauve. The paper was of varying shades of anaemic greens and yellows, and there was always a vase of flowers, usually rather faded ones, placed on the back of the seat. This made it a little difficult to sit down. Still if one were not in too much of a hurry it could be managed. The middle one was exclusively for romantic temperaments. It was painted in clear primary colour. On the wall in large red letters were moral extracts from Wordsworth's poems. On the door was a card which instead of the usual "Please do not throw any refuse down the drains" had an imposing notice in blue type urging one to improve one's mind and soul even while the body was engaged in base matters. All the other four lavatories were reserved for special types of temperament.

Mademoiselle Thiery had to talk to everyone before she could tell them which lavatory to go into. Not only talk to them but ask them leading questions, the kind of thing which would force them to commit themselves. Make them reveal in two words whether or not they were romantic. The first time I had felt the need to go to the lavatories, this cross-examination disturbing nature's call almost caused a disaster. I really was in a desperate hurry, so trying to say something definite, I had rashly committed myself to being Eighteenth Century. This was stupid because in fact I wasn't any more. I had been a month before, but now I was just ultra sub ultra Romantique. I wasn't quite sure what that was, but I had a kind of feeling it would be the right kind of lack of emotion to portray next time I went to tea in the mews around Gordon Square.

The public lavatories were now the only amusing recreation in that small provincial town 250 miles from Paris. I had come there with the intention of writing about provincial life in an ultra sub ultra Romantique manner, but instead I spent most of my time going to the lavatory so as to have the opportunity of talking to Mademoiselle Thiery and of making her recount the full tragedy of her life.

It was indeed very sad. When she was only thirty-five her father had died leaving her an orphan with a small income. Her friends had tried to urge her to accept a job in the cash desk of the local grocer, but she had scornfully refused it. Indeed as the offers of employment increased she became more and more haughty and aloof. She even refused an offer of matrimony from the local butcher. She had other plans.

For the past three years Mademoiselle Thiery had done nothing but read everything she could find about Madame de Pompadour and the great courtesans of her age. It is true she had occasional lapses into the Saturday Evening Post. Her father had insisted on her learning English and it was the only Anglo-Saxon literature obtainable with ease in Thronville. From her reading she had developed a great and violent ambition to have a salon, where the most famous philosophers of the time would come together and brightly discuss the failings of their mistresses. The most intellectual of them all would pay the expenses of keeping up the salon, and sleep with her. In bed they would discuss the discoveries of Newton or possibly of Einstein. She would become known throughout France as the source of inspiration of the great geniuses of the age. No really great poems would be written without mentioning the kind of fan she wore at the last great gathering in her salon. Since it was the Twentieth Century Einstein couldn't very well fight a duel for her sake. But they would send a special representative from Holly-

wood to take a topical event of her sitting on his knee offering him a radish. There would be a large headline in the Chicago newspapers, RELATIVITY REANIMATES THE RADISH RAGE. This would be rather useful, because if she were getting tired of Einstein she could just throw him over and manage to finance the interval before the next came with the handsome present of £1000 from the radish combine.

But first she must get to Paris. One couldn't have a salon in an out-of-the-way place like Thronville.

She rather surprised her father's trustee by suddenly demanding the whole of her capital in a lump sum. Having obtained it in spite of the protests she set out to the station with nothing but a small suitcase under one arm and Laclos' "*Les Liaisons Dangereuses*" under the other. When she got to the Gare du Nord she didn't quite know what to do next. Still she thought she'd better leave the Laclos and the suitcase in the cloakroom while she hunted for the appropriate salon. At last she found a house in the Faubourg St. Germain. The rent for three months was three-quarters of her income. She was rather shocked. It was much more expensive than she had expected. She hadn't particularly wanted a whole house — anyhow not such a large one.

But the agent had said if she wanted the salon she'd have to have the rest of the house as well.

Studios were the only thing that came detached. They wouldn't do at all. One couldn't expect Einstein to bother to keep up a studio. She remembered what the Saturday Evening Post had said about them. Sordid Surroundings. Starving Struggling Students. Einstein couldn't afford to be associated with studios. So she decided to be slightly extravagant and take the house. Some admirer would naturally be keeping it up before many days.

She'd been in Paris a week now. It wasn't exciting. The salon was empty and so was the house. She didn't know how one began collecting intelligentsia for a salon. Really she didn't know how to start collecting anyone in a strange town. It was getting rather dreary being alone in that very large house. Especially at night. All the elaborate Louis XIVth furniture was becoming terribly dusty. She didn't see what one could do about dust when it accumulated on such a very large area She didn't even understand the technique of making beds, so she just moved around from room to room. She'd used up seven now, but there were ten bedrooms. Still it would be wiser only to use up nine. One ought to be kept clean and ready for the first admirer.

It was becoming rather a problem how one collected the appropriate intelligentsia. She tried sitting in the Luxembourg regularly from nine to ten on a seat near the merry-go-round. She assumed that the greatest poet of the age would come and sit on the same seat. An old lady slightly deaf, three nursemaids and six babies had come and sat on the seat — nothing else. She decided she'd have to open her salon the following Sunday. Since there was no one else she'd better ask the old lady and one of the nursemaids. First she'd have to make conversation to the old lady.

"Would you mind telling me the time," she began. The old lady was apparently rather deaf. It took her at least ten minutes to understand what she was saying. Still she felt she was getting rather friendly trying to make her hear. She even got up quite close to her ear and shouted. She felt she was perhaps sufficiently intimate, when the old lady had understood about the time, to ask her to tea.

"Will you come to tea next Sunday at five o'clock?" she screamed.

Even then she hadn't heard. "Come to 176 Boulevard St. Germain at five o'clock next Sunday," she yelled.

"Oh, I see you want some stockings darned," said the old lady politely. She was very pleased and smiling. "However did you know I took in mending? Certainly I'll come and fetch them at five o'clock on Sunday."

It was obviously useless trying to explain. She'd just have to let the old lady come, thinking she was fetching some mending. It would mean explaining to some of the great poets that she was really an interesting character. But at the moment she was undergoing a reaction against contemporary fashion. She believed everyone should dress so as to express their soul.

The nursemaid was easier to manage. She began by admiring the two large babies — twins. Only eighteen months old, but wonderfully advanced for their age. Then she just asked the nursemaid to come to tea, Boulevard St. Germain.

"Ah, do you work in one of those large houses?" the girl asked. "Parlormaid or cook?"

"I am the mistress of the salon," said Mlle. Thiery with dignity.

The nursemaid didn't quite know what that was. She thought it was probably much lower than either cook or parlormaid. It would be more tactful not to inquire. She didn't usually associate with anything lower than cooks. If it was too low she'd just have to make some excuse and come away after five minutes.

"It won't derange if I bring the babies?" she inquired.

Mademoiselle Thiery was a little startled. She was sure that Madame de Pompadour had never had babies to tea with her lovers They would be even harder to explain than the deaf old lady's clothes. But she would have to have them. The nursemaid couldn't come without. Anyhow, it had given her

an idea. Perhaps the nursemaid could bring someone really interesting.

"Bring anyone else you'd care to," she suggested.

"Well, I might bring my young man," said the nursemaid. "He's not very handsome. He's really only a temporary arrangement, but I should think he'll last until next Sunday. I shouldn't think anything better will come along in the next two days."

"Is he a poet or a musician?" asked Mlle. Thiery.

"Well neither professionally, but —"

"Of course it takes a long time to get anything published," said Mlle. Thiery hopefully. "But does he show any tendencies that way?"

"Well, his eyes do look rather poetical when he's going to kiss me," said the nursemaid.

"Do they become quite so when he actually does?" inquired Mlle. Thiery.

"He hasn't yet," she said. "If he doesn't before next Sunday I really think I shall have to give him up."

"Do wait till Sunday night," Mlle. Thiery said urgently.

That was excellent, a real about-to-be poet was coming. He would do quite well to start off with. During the afternoon she would have to arrange to sit on his knee. Of course the nursemaid would be broken-hearted. But Madame de Pompadour hadn't minded breaking a few women's hearts. As the Saturday Evening Post remarked quite wisely, a woman's heart takes twice as long to break as the stronger sex's.

It was now necessary to collect a musician or two.

Mlle. Thiery walked down the Rue Madame. A man with long hair was playing a rather squeaky violin. He put out his cap for sous as she passed. She emptied the contents of her purse into it. He was a little startled.

"You are a great musician?" Mlle. Thiery inquired.

"I don't know about that, I'm chiefly hungry," he said.

"Ah, I see you've fallen from fame. Just temporarily out of favour with the *grand monde*. Never mind, you must come and perform in my salon next Sunday. When the great ones hear you there you'll soon get famous again. You will come to tea 176 Boulevard St. Germain next Sunday at five o'clock?"

"I'd rather have some tea now," he said.

"No, but you really must come then." Mlle. Thiery was firm.

"All right," he agreed. There would probably be some valuable silver in those old St. Germain houses.

"Bring some friends if you'd care to," said Mlle. Thiery.

He agreed to bring along his mate.

"Is he a poet or a musician?" inquired Mlle Thiery.

"He doesn't do anything special. Just drinks quite a lot."

"Ah, an eccentric," Mlle. Thiery was delighted. "Disapproves of routine life?"

She walked a little way up the street. There was a large white building on the left marked Y. W. C. A.

She saw a notice in large black type. "Social gatherings Mondays and Fridays. All young women with Christian outlook invited." She wasn't sure that she was a young woman with a Christian outlook or that young women with Christian outlooks were likely to be demi-mondaines. She wasn't quite sure what a demi-mondaine was, but she knew they were necessary company for great philosophers. But as she didn't know where to get any others she'd have to go to the social gathering tonight to try and collect a few of them.

It was half-past nine. She'd just got home from the Y.W. C. A. gathering.

The young women she'd met in the interval of a lot of singing hadn't really seemed quite the right kind of people to go with philosophers. Still as she'd have to have someone

she'd asked the four who seemed least concerned about the future of their souls. They were all English and rather ugly. Their ugliness would have to be attributed to their aristocratic British blood. She felt she'd read somewhere that that was one of the results of being legitimate among the British upper classes.

Sunday afternoon had come. There was a loud ring at the door. It was a pity there wasn't a footman. She'd have to answer it herself and explain that she thought it was better not to have anyone in the house who could possibly make a scandal. Servants had really no respect for "*les grandes passions.*"

It was the four young women from the Y. W. C. A. They walked upstairs stiffly one behind the other. They went into the salon on tiptoe and sat on the edge of four chairs all in a row. When she looked at them Mlle. Thiery had a kind of intuition that it might be better to put off discussing the servants and "*les grandes passions*" until they'd had their tea. The next minute she was glad she had.

"The French domestic problem must be far greater than the British," said the one at the end of the row in a sad squeaky voice with her eyes fixed on the accumulation of dust.

"Have you heard the scandal about the Duchesse de Bourgogne?" said Mlle. Thiery hopefully making bright conversation. It was going to be all as it should. They'd only got to the first scene of the great gathering, the demi-mondaines discussing scandal before their lovers arrived.

"We do not permit our minds to dwell on the evil deeds of others," said the end lady sadly.

"We keep our minds untarnished."

"Pure," said the third.

"Unsullied," said the fourth.

That wasn't quite as it should be. Demi-mondaine conversation ought to be rather dashing.

Thank goodness there was the bell.

"Have you got the stockings ready, dear," said the old lady coming into the hall.

"Hush," said Mlle. Thiery. "You must come in and have some tea."

"The Duchesse de Bourgogne," said Mlle. Thiery, introducing the old lady to the young women from the Y. W. C. A. "We had just been discussing you," she continued, hoping her voice sounded flippant. "Hadn't we?" she added, turning on the four young ladies.

"Discussing you," she screamed as the old lady hadn't heard.

The four young ladies blushed one after the other then looked the other way.

The door bell rang.

"The Duchesse will entertain you," she said to the four young ladies. Then, flippantly, "But you'd better not ask her with whom she spent the night. Probably Paul the first half and Jean the second," she whispered loudly as she left the room.

Fortunately the old lady did not hear. But the four young women were scandalized. They had never before even seen a woman who lived in sin. They determined to go as soon as their hostess came back. In the meantime they moved over to the other side of the salon so as to be as far away as possible from contamination with vice.

The nursemaid came in with the young man and the babies. The young man was tall and thin, he wore glasses, and had an earnest expression and a lot of spots on his face. The four young ladies got up to say goodby. But the bell rang again.

It was the musician and his mate. "The greatest musician and philosopher of the age," anounced Mlle. Thiery.

"Lawks, it's a disorderly beggar," said the nursemaid. Mlle. Thiery must be even lower class than she'd thought. She dropped the babies on the chair, seized her young man's arm and held it firmly. One needed protection against the lower grades of society.

Mlle. Thiery thought the best way to start a *grande passion* with a musician was to stir his simplest animal emotions. The Saturday Evening Post had said that the maternal was the strongest and simplest emotion in all human breasts. So she took one of the babies and handed it to the musician.

"Now we will all have tea," she said with determination.

"Tea in the same room as that tramp," said the nursemaid indignantly, "Certainly not."

"I'm sorry, but we really must be going," said the four young ladies together. "We're really very broad-minded, but after what you've told us about that woman we —"

"Kaka," said the baby in the musician's arms, proudly.

"Remove the child from that man's arms," said the nursemaid firmly to her young man.

The young man felt rather frightened. He wasn't naturally heroic and there was an angry look in the musician's eye.

"Would you mind very much if I took the child?" he said in a trembling voice.

"Mind! I should think I wouldn't." The musician was obviously indignant. "I seem to be all wet."

The young man took the baby and held it tenderly upside down.

The nursemaid seized it and retired to the opposite end of the room.

Mlle. Thiery knew that this was the moment she would somehow have to manage to sit on the poet's knee. Unfortunately he was standing.

"Let's all sit down," she said. The Christian young ladies had got up to go, but they were so used to doing what they were told that they just sat down again automatically.

They all sat down around the tea table. There was an awkward silence, occasionally interrupted by gurgling from the nursemaid and the baby in the corner.

The silence continued. The four young ladies sat bolt upright. The musician's mate occasionally spat and the duchess had fallen asleep. Mlle. Thiery knew she'd have to do it suddenly or she wouldn't be able to at all. She jumped up suddenly and threw herself onto the knee of the nursemaid's young man.

"Darling," she said in a loud, strained, high-pitched voice.

The four young ladies fell off their chairs one after the other, saying "My God" slowly and deliberately. The nursemaid dropped the baby and, screaming, rushed over and seized her young man by the hair.

In the meantime the musician and his mate collected all the silver teaspoons and available small ornaments, then crept quietly out of the house.

Exactly what had happened after that Mlle. Thiery could not quite remember. All she knew was that her face was rather scratched and most of her hair pulled out by the nursemaid.

She woke up in bed an hour later with the four young ladies around her. She had apparently fainted. Their modesty forbade them telling her exactly what had happened.

She stayed in Paris until the lease of the house ran out, but she shut up the salon. She knew now that it was just the mixing that had caused the disaster. One shouldn't try and mix different temperaments. She determined to get a book on the

different classes of temperament and never mix them again. If necessary she would read a good deal of poetry, both English and French. The books that described the mixed gatherings of the Eighteenth Century ladies were obviously inaccurate. One just couldn't mix in a Duchess with ordinary English demi-mondaines.

When the three months were up she went back to Thronville; she had just enough money left for her fare. The relations were very much shocked at the sight of her without any of her capital. But one kind old aunt said she might come and live with her. When the aunt died the neighbours took the situation into their own hands.

The Town Council had just opened a new public lavatory. As she wasn't fit for any other job the neighbours insisted she should accept the post of lavatory attendant.

Before she had seemed listless and rather sad. But when she took over the lavatory she brightened up.

Obviously a lavatory was just as good as a salon. The one thing to do was not to mix people. As long as one separated different temperaments all would go well.

I was really rather proud to be the only person in Thronville in whom Mlle. Thiery had ever confided about her past life. No one else knew what had happened in Paris. The neighbours just concluded she had had an unfortunate love affair and had gone slightly wrong in the head. Unfortunately I was unable to take her the pink carnations. The day after going into the wrong one I had a sudden call to Paris.

When I returned to Thronville, six months later, the first thing I did was to visit the public lavatories, but Mlle. Thiery wasn't there. A brisk very ordinary young woman put my penny into the slot of the wrong door. She didn't seem to mind in

the least it's being the wrong one. Inside it was all changed — quite plain and whitewashed.

I made inquiries about Mlle. Thiery. She was dead.

"You see," said the brisk young woman, "the Town Sanitation Commission ordered all the public lavatories in the town to be whitewashed for the sake of the public health. After they had whitewashed her lavatories Mlle. Thiery had never been the same again. She just seemed to pine."

As I was a liberal with strong anti-labor feeling I was pleased to find a case illustrating so well the tragic results of the interference of public organisations. It consoled me a little for the loss of the *grande courtisane.*

A HORSE AND A MAN

by

Mihail Sadoveanu

I don't think the man was very old.

He had a heavily lined face and grey hair; most likely because he had suffered. He walked with his head sunk on his chest, threading his way through the crowd and seemingly ashamed of living. Only when he took his nag by the bridle and beat it with a gnarled stick his troubled eyes would brighten up. Then he knew that he was alive, since he too could bully, grumble, blaspheme.

He clipped his beard close, not having the money to shave; for he did not want to wear a beard, he wanted absolutely to be like his fellow-citizens. He had no decent wagon, only a miserable little cart, much repaired and all tied up with ropes; but it was his, this cart, and he couldn't let it just rot by the roadside. His horse was small, skinny, the color of brick, with a stump of a tail, the under-lip drooped, the hooves were splayed out and the large, sick eyes seemed always to be asking for a little rest. But it was his own horse, he beat it, he ordered it about, he swore at it, he carried with its help all the rubbish of the town at fifteen francs a load. At midday and in the evening, dragging their feet, the pair of them would make for Manzatu's dram-shop, where he drank his glass of

rachi munching a bit of bread while the horse nibbled some odds and ends of oats picked up here, there, God knows where.

"If you ask me, I'm not buying stuff just for the horse to eat," said its master, addressing nobody in particular.

He was like that all the time I knew him, clad in rags dragging his heavy boots and trudging heavily beside his decrepit cart. There were a lot of us children in that town. With towsled hair, prancing along, we ran after the old fellow, and threw stones at him, crying: "*Chichiuta, Chichiuta.*" And from all sides the stones showered merrily on his whole outfit. Sometimes the stones hit the horse, whereupon it switched its stump of a tail and feebly waggled one ear. Other missiles hit the man. He turned around on us, shook the fist that held the gnarled stick, showed his teeth, screwed up his face more than ever, and began to swear at us. We followed him quite a long time, until he began to gnaw at his finger-ends and out of sheer rage to throw his cap on the ground. We exploded with laughter, our mouths wide open, our hair all flying; and so we left him to his fate. As for him, he made off thrashing his horse: it was all he could do, since he could not thrash us.

I don't know where Chichiuta had his house, but somewhere he must have owned some old windowless shack. Perhaps it was good enough for him. In the winter he kept himself warm inside as best he could and stopped up the cracks with rags. Inside there he shivered, while the horse, Roibul, remained outside, now on one side, now on the other, glued to the spot, seeking shelter from the storm, his head down, his tail and mane blowing in the wind.

In summer, Chichiuta didn't even trouble to go as far as his hut. On the outskirts of the town there was a bit of open prairie land with a few small trees growing amidst the wild heather. The two of them went and lay down there for the night,

under the domed foliage of the trees. Above them the sky was a fine golden dust, the wind breathed gently, then the moon rose and by the light of it one could make out their shadows, motionless, the horse and the man beside the skeleton of the cart.

Chichiuta had a wife, too; that is to say, he had had one. But right at the start, in the first year or so, she had run away. She worked in the town, did whitewashing, carried water, took in laundry. She was a lean woman, strong, and slightly pock-marked. I once heard her talking with Chichiuta, and I knew it was his wife.

It was Fair Day, a Sunday, the horse and its master were plodding their way through the crowd, without stopping, as if they had been condemned to keep on plodding. Close to the empty cart a woman went quickly past. The horse halted, its head sank, and its master looked up with his faded blue eyes and his sharp yellow nose.

"Maranda . . ." said Chichiuta gently, in his rasping voice.

The woman stopped, but did no more than turn her head over her shoulder toward the man and toward the horse.

"Maranda, have you made up your mind?"

He was no longer looking at her. He lowered his eyes.

"What do you want me to make up my mind about?" she retorted. "I'm not coming back to you any more; here, thank God, I make a living."

"Listen, Maranda," said Chichiuta, hoarsely, "my shirt's all torn to bits, I've nobody to look after me, I haven't. It means a lot to a house, a woman in it; don't you think so?"

"Sure I think so. But what sort of a house have you got? Call that a house? Anybody would laugh at a house like that. The wind and the rain come in as if they were at home there. Not a thing, not a rag in it, nothing Worse than a dog-kennel."

Chichiuta said nothing. He kept his eyes fixed on the ground,

his wife scarcely turned round, and the horse dozed, with its nose in the dust, while the crowd strolled up and down, to the right and to the left of them. The man spoke again:

"What about me, if you don't believe me, who d'you think will? If you aren't coming to the house, who d'you think is? I've done my best, but it's no use. If there was somebody to save a bit and keep the place to rights, a person might get somewhere . . ."

The woman was silent; then turning her head she threw a look of rage at him.

"Save a bit! I know you. You drink your money away at Manzatu's."

The man's voice interrupted brusquely:

"What! I eat my money, I drink it? Why, I don't even buy anything for the horse. And you, why don't you come along? We'll have a drink to it together. But you, you're not the woman to stay at home. You run around other folk's houses. You're a wretch, you would let me live on worms. And instead of coming to live in your own home you make a joke of it . . ."

"You're a fool, Gavril," said the woman, with an evil laugh. "What sort of home have you got? I prefer to stay where God wills."

A moment of silence, and Chichiuta seemed to remember something:

"Isn't it all your fault? You don't remember? I was a man like the rest of them. I remember, I do. I used to go out working amongst decent people, and you, you played around with the others. And then, one day, two men fell on me, all because of you, and beat me up, with sticks, too, and left me as good as dead . . . I became what I am, and you cleared out. And now you won't come back; you even left the kid. I ask you, what could I do? That was too much, that just about finished

me. It might have been the death of me. Look, I've still a hole in my head from that day. When it's cold I can feel the wind blowing in my brain. I used to look at the boy: "What's the matter with you, Nicuta?" And says he: 'Pa-ta-ta!' and starts crying. He couldn't stand on his feet anymore. You could see his bones through his skin. I asked him and asked him. But what could he tell me? He didn't even know what ailed him. And it was like that he died. And you, you were running around with strangers; you didn't want to have anything to do with him. You're a wretch. Get out of here, or I'll kill you! . . ."

And suddenly Chichiuta's crazed eyes changed color. He raised the fist which held the gnarled stick. Maranda recoiled a few steps and made haste to lose herself in the crowd.

The man muttered something and then struck his horse with all his strength. Roibul gave a start, moved his tail, then one ear, turned his head a moment, looked around him with his big weary eyes and went on again, dragging the almost empty cart as if it had been a full load.

Chichiuta often used to talk like this with his Maranda, but nothing ever came of it. He remained all alone with his horse, carting the refuse of the town for fifteen francs a load. Afterwards he stopped at Manzatu's dram-shop. Then he shouted at the children who threw stones at him and leapt all around him like so many little devils. This was the way he lived in our little town.

But, one day, Roibul was so tired he simply didn't want to draw the cart. He remained standing outside Manzatu's, his nose in the scraps of oats, sadly and slowly blinking his inflamed eyes.

Chichiuta swore at him in his hoarse, thick voice.

"What's bit you, damn you! What's come over you? Here I've watered you; I've given you your feed. What more d'you want?"

With his stick he beat his horse on the sides and on the rump. The horse moved its tail and gently shook its head from side to side. Then, staggering under the blows, it made a last effort and plodded heavily along, as far as their bed under the shelter of the tree.

"What's up with you, my fine fellow? You prize mule!" said Gavril, unhitching the harness. "Making faces like an aristocrat! You'd think you'd worked a whole lot today . . ."

The horse dropped to the ground.

"What! You want to stretch yourself and yawn when you get up? Look here, my friend, we've got work to do, we have. What're you thinking about? Perhaps you'd like to take an aperitif, drink a tot of rum, smoke a nice pipe. After that, gad about a bit, here and there, and maybe write a line or two . . . And then four different sorts of courses. Christ's Sake! Life's all right, you see, all I want is to drink a trifle of brandy, that's all. Eat? What's that? Eating's a luxury! . . . But suppose you do want a nap afterwards . . . You sleep a bit, then you go out and have a bite, a sip of wine here, a morsel of cheese there, and walk about a while, and then back to your four courses! . . . You're a low cuss, you are, you don't know how to live. You munch your scraps of oats and say nothing. But what's up with you? Why d'you stay like that, eh?"

Roibul remained stretched out, his nostrils buried in the damp earth. He blinked slowly, once or twice. Night had fallen. A faint midst drifted among the few trees.

"*What's up with you, you . . .?*"

He got up and gave the horse a kick.

"Now take me, for instance. I'm drunk. I have a hole in my head and I'm a bit short in the wits . . . But what the hell's wrong with you? You needn't tell me you're time is up, you don't mean to die. Get up!"

He seized the horse's ears and pulled them. But Roibul's head fell back again. Gavril said no more, he dropped to the ground and began to regard his companion attentively. The horse slowly settled its muzzle again on the damp earth.

"My nag's dying," muttered Chichiuta; "what's going to become of me? I've done my best to make something out of myself, to get my wife back to the house, put my place in order. God didn't want it. Those little devils smothered me with stones, I've been beaten up, I've been spat on; I've been no good, too; I had a son, he's dead. When I had a sou I drank it. That's my life. And now, *the horse dies.* What's going to become of me?"

He gave the horse another kick.

"Hey! What's wrong with you?"

Then he put on his coat and lay down, according to his habit.

For the last time the horse was caressed by the evening wind. And so it remained, as motionless as the clumps of wild heather and the logs of wood that rotted on the ground, at last at rest.

— translated from the Roumanian
by Hedy Verena Gossman

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If it isn't the Best
We can't afford
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